

OBITUARY

JACQUES ELLUL (1912–1994)

Andrew Goddard

Jacques Ellul was unquestionably one of the most original and prolific Christian social critics of this century. His death, in his home town of Bordeaux on 19 May 1994 at the age of eighty-two, has deprived the Christian church of one of its greatest prophetic voices in the contemporary world.

Among Christian ethicists he is probably best known for such works as *The Technological Society*, *Violence*, and *The Ethics of Freedom*.¹ These books, however, represent only a tiny fraction of his literary output which, by the time of his death, amounted to fifty published volumes (about thirty of which have been translated into English) and well over a thousand articles.²

Although many are familiar with some of Ellul's books, the man himself is an unknown figure to most of his readers. They are also often unaware that each published volume forms part of an extensive and carefully structured *oeuvre* comprising numerous historical and sociological studies as well as biblical, theological and ethical works. In the light of his recent death, the twin aims of this obituary article are to present a brief account of Ellul's life and to sketch the central features of his writing in order to facilitate a wider appreciation and proper assessment of his thought.³

¹ *The Technological Society* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1965); *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (SCM Press, London, 1970); *The Ethics of Freedom* (Mowbrays, London, 1976).

² A full and regularly updated bibliography is produced by Joyce Hanks and published in *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 1984 Supplement 1 and 1991, Volume 11, pp. 197–299.

³ The best introductions to Ellul's thought are Fasching, Darrell J., *The Thought of Jacques Ellul: A Systematic Exposition*, Toronto Studies in Theology, vol. 7, Edwin Mellen Press, New York, 1981; Troude-Chastenot, Patrick, *Lire Ellul: Introduction à l'oeuvre socio-politique de Jacques Ellul*, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, Bordeaux, 1992 and Sturm,

OBITUARY: JACQUES ELLUL (1912–1994)

A. Biography

Jacques César Ellul was born in Bordeaux on 6 January 1912. Little is known of his childhood except that it was marked by the family's regular experience of poverty, his father's strong code of honour, and the lack of any significant Christian education. In 1928, on completion of his schooling, he began to study in Bordeaux University's Law Faculty, remaining there until the completion of his doctorate in Roman Law in 1936.

These years of his further education were decisive in the formation of Ellul. They began with renewed economic hardship as his father experienced yet another period of unemployment. Ellul began examining the reasons for his family's poverty and, in 1930, when he borrowed Marx's *Le Capital* from the university library, he believed he had found the answer:

All at once I felt as if I had discovered something totally unexpected and totally stupefying, precisely because it related directly to my practical experience ... I felt I understood everything. I felt that at last I knew why my father was out of work, at last I knew why we were destitute ... Marx was an astonishing discovery of the reality of this world ... I discovered in Marx the possibility of understanding what was going on.⁴

Although he became politically active on the radical left (participating in the February 1934 protests, the anti-Fascist movement, and the Spanish Civil War), Ellul joined neither the socialist party nor the communists. It was, instead, the nascent French personalist movement which became the arena for his revolutionary zeal. It also provided the context in which he began his life-long quest to apply Marx's method to his contemporary world in order to understand its distinctive structure and driving forces.⁵

From about 1930, Ellul joined with Bernard Charbonneau in starting local groups in southwest France. These sought to examine the central ideas of contemporary society and the Western intellectual tradition and to discern what material phenomena now determined the development of Western civilization. Then, by focussing on the human person, they hoped to effect a fundamental revolution which would be not only social, economic and political but also personal and

Douglas, 'Jacques Ellul' in *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*, eds Peerman, Dean G. and Marty, Martin E., Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1984 enlarged edition, pp. 561–82.

⁴ *Perspectives On Our Age* (The Seabury Press, New York, 1981), pp. 4, 5.

⁵ The classic study of the personalist movements in this period — Loubet del Bayle, Jean-Louis, *Les non-conformistes des années 30: une tentative de renouvellement de la pensée politique française*, Seuil, Paris, 1969 — does not refer to Ellul but sheds much light on the world in which he was active.

spiritual. Although they established links with the major national personalist groups — Emmanuel Mounier's *Esprit* and *Ordre Nouveau* — Ellul and Charbonneau represented a distinctive strand of personalism and their vision was so divergent from that of *Esprit's* leadership that in 1938 they resigned their membership.⁶

Among the original features of their personalist groups was an emphasis on the centrality of '*la technique*' as dominant in the modern world. Ellul recalled in 1974,

I was actually a Marxist in 1933–4. And I asked myself then: If Marx were alive today, would he be so disposed to cite as the crucial social phenomenon of history the ownership of property? What would he cite as crucial? And I decided that it would be the phenomenon of technique.⁷

This emphasis on Technique is the most obvious connection between this period and Ellul's later work but it is in unpublished pieces for the personalist movement that Ellul first addresses many of the other themes which recur throughout his writings — law, federalism, anarchism, the city, the press, money, totalitarianism, commonplaces. Those same writings also reveal the source of Ellul's central belief that the modern world, despite its apparent diversity (fascism, communism and liberal democratic capitalism in the 1930s), is uniformly marked by a radical break with the past. Its novelty is seen in the creation of new totalitarian structures which are destructive of the human person and necessitate a personal and collective revolution in order to create alternative social forms and institutions.⁸

Contemporaneous with the birth of Ellul's Marx-inspired, personalist critique of modern society there was the birth of his faith in Jesus Christ. In 1932, he publicly professed himself to be a Christian and joined the minority French Protestant community. He immediately began his lifelong study of theology and ethics, rapidly discovering

⁶ The distinctive contribution of Ellul and Charbonneau has been uncovered by Christian Roy in 'Aux sources d'écologie politique: le personnalisme 'gascon' de Bernard Charbonneau et Jacques Ellul', *Canadian Journal of History* 27, April 1992, pp. 67–100. Ellul discusses his differences with *Esprit* in 'Pourquoi je me suis séparé de Mounier', *Réforme*, whole no. 265, 15 April 1950, pp. 6, 7 and *In Season Out of Season* (Harper & Row, New York, 1982), pp. 33–44.

⁷ Interview with Ellul in Menninger, David, 'Technique and Politics: The Political Thought of Jacques Ellul', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California-Riverside, 1974, p. 209. One of the earliest formulations of this appears in the unpublished 'Directives pour un manifeste personnaliste' written in the mid-1930s by Ellul and Charbonneau. Ellul acknowledged the insight was originally Charbonneau's but it dominates Ellul's later sociological writing much more than Charbonneau's work and is discussed further below.

⁸ Some of these unpublished 1930s articles have been deposited in the Ellul Archive at Wheaton College, Illinois and I am grateful to the Archive for providing me with these and other primary source materials.

OBITUARY: JACQUES ELLUL (1912–1994)

his sympathy with Augustine and Calvin and falling in love with Kierkegaard. Then, through the Protestant student body (the *Fédé*) and its leader Jean Bosc, he was introduced to Karl Barth with the result that, in his own words, 'Barth ... became the second great element in my intellectual life'.⁹

In 1937 Ellul was appointed to the Montpellier Law Faculty and a year later moved to a post at Strasbourg University from which the Vichy government sacked him in July 1940. Shortly after returning to occupied Bordeaux, he fled with his family to the countryside where they remained throughout the war. During these years of exile Ellul farmed, became active in the Resistance, pastored the local Protestant community, and began, but did not complete, a correspondence course in theology (the nearest he ever came to a formal theological education). Then, in 1943, success in gaining his *agrégation* in law enabled him to be appointed to the Bordeaux law faculty although this had to be kept secret due to continued opposition from the government.

Ellul became convinced that post-war France could move 'From Resistance to Revolution' and in 1944 he eagerly accepted the invitation to serve as Deputy Mayor in Bordeaux's liberation city council. There are few details of his short political career but his frustrations and disappointments are clearly the source of his almost wholly negative perception of mainstream political life in the contemporary world. The immediate revival of traditional party political hostilities and his need to rely constantly on the elaborate administrative and bureaucratic machineries of government meant that when the time came to elect a new council in 1947 he had achieved none of the fundamental social and political changes which he had begun to work for in the 1930s personalist movement. As a result, he left political office with his hope and faith in effecting revolutionary change through political action destroyed.

This disillusionment meant that although he remained a regular commentator on contemporary issues in the French press, Ellul's energy was henceforth focussed on the political fringes. He constantly argued that the major parties all failed to address the fundamental questions of our time and sympathised instead with anarchist groups such as Guy Debord's Situationists. He supported various protest groups and radical causes and two of these particularly served to confirm and further shape his social and political thought which appears so idiosyncratic to those whose understanding is moulded by the forms of political discourse which dominate the mass media. In the mid 1950s he pioneered work among young delinquents, a field in which he was both locally and nationally active until 1977. In addition, he and Charbonneau were early leaders in the French ecological movement. From the late 1960s, they sought (unsuccessfully) to

⁹ *Perspectives On Our Age*, op. cit., p. 17.

challenge the state's proposed 'development' of their Aquitaine region by a combination of legal actions and the organisation of locally based opposition groups.

Ellul's revolutionary zeal was also directed towards the church:

I said to myself that if there are any people capable of changing the society they live in, then it would be the Christians. I had my Christian reasons for transforming this society — why not work with other Christians? Why could I not get the church to change and become the salt of the earth, a leaven, a force that would change society?¹⁰

Internationally, he was involved in the World Council of Churches from its formation, serving on a commission for the 1948 First Assembly in Amsterdam. However, he became increasingly unhappy with its political stance and finally broke from it after the 1966 Geneva Conference.¹¹

Nationally, Ellul served for many years on the National Synod and National Council of the French Reformed Church where, together with Jean Bosc, he laboured to transform its structures, strategy and theological training so that it could become an effective means of changing society. The high esteem in which he was held is witnessed to by the fact that, despite lacking any formal theological qualifications, he succeeded Bosc as editor of *Foi et Vie*, the distinguished bi-monthly theological journal which represents the Barthian wing of French Protestantism and to which Ellul contributed over seventy articles between 1939 and 1994.¹²

Locally, Ellul and his wife Yvette were very active in their parish of Pessac. He pastored the congregation for many years and most of his published biblical studies originated in his local preaching and leading of bible studies.

In addition to these socio-political and ecclesial engagements, Ellul held the posts of Professor of the History and Sociology of Institutions in the Law Faculty of Bordeaux University and Professor in the Institute of Political Studies through until his retirement in 1980. Although his academic expertise was the history of law — his untranslated five-volume *Histoire des Institutions*, first published in the 1950s, remains a standard French university textbook in the subject — he lectured on a wide range of subjects and within the academic world his revolutionary project made him a passionate

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

¹¹ For Ellul's later reflections see his 'Some Reflections on the Ecumenical Movement', *Ecumenical Review* 40, 1988, pp. 382-90.

¹² The journal's tribute to Ellul — *Foi et Vie*, Vol. XCIII, Nos 5-6, Décembre 1994, 'Le Siècle de Jacques Ellul: Hommage de *Foi et Vie* à la mémoire de son Directeur' — contains a number of excellent articles on the man and his work.

advocate of fundamental institutional reform of the universities and a vehement critic of the various post-war education reforms implemented by different French governments.

Complementing these numerous and diverse post-war activities there is Ellul's extensive literary output during the same period. Although his first book (*The Theological Foundation of Law*) was only published in 1946, Ellul had planned some of his subsequent volumes as early as the 1930s and in 1942–3 he had fixed the basic structure and themes of his subsequent writing. He thus always claimed that he had, from the beginning, conceived his books as *un ensemble* with each book only a chapter in the one book which is the whole of his corpus.¹³ To engage seriously with Ellul it is therefore necessary not only to know the details of his life which moulded his thought but, in addition, 'his work really must be read in its entirety or not at all'.¹⁴ The following section, arising out of such a comprehensive encounter with Ellul, delineates the structure and central features of his work in order to assist those with neither the time nor the inclination for such a demanding task.

B. Works and Thought

The 'book' which is Ellul's corpus has a carefully planned dialectical structure arising from his youthful encounters with Marx and Christ. It forms what he called 'a composition in counterpoint' comprising sociological 'chapters' which study the structure of the modern world under the influence of Marx and, in dialogue with this, theological 'chapters' which, under the witness of revelation, reflect upon Christian faith and practice in that world. A proper recognition and appreciation of this basic structure and distinction is vital and it is misunderstandings here which often lead many to ignore, dismiss or distort Ellul's thought. Each strand of his work must therefore be treated on its own terms before an overview and assessment of the corpus as a whole can be offered.

Sociological studies

Ellul's sociological studies originate in his youthful experience of living in a terrifying and changing world which he felt he needed to

¹³ The fullest discussion from Ellul is found in the untranslated, Ellul, Jacques and Nordon, Didier, *L'Homme à lui-même: correspondance*, Editions du Félin, Paris, 1992, pp. 21–30.

¹⁴ Boli-Bennett, John, 'The Absolute Dialectics of Jacques Ellul' in *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 3, 1980, p. 197.

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

understand. Although often accused of being overly negative and pessimistic, their real aim is a positive and revolutionary one. They seek to enable his readers to become aware of (*prendre conscience de*) their complex social reality and thereby discern the source of their alienation so that, in the light of this knowledge, individuals will be encouraged to critique and change (*mettre en question*) the world in which they live.

In order to achieve these ends Ellul focusses not on the constantly changing current events which are the concern of the mass media nor on the more abstract and universal phenomena which attract the attention of philosophers. Instead, he seeks to set our age within the context of the evolution of Western civilization and to discern the distinctive forces, structures and ideologies which decisively shape and mould its development.

Undergirding all Ellul's sociological analyses is his central belief that it is Technique which has become the new determinant of the twentieth century world and that modern Technique is qualitatively different from all earlier techniques. As a result, our world constructed by Technique is fundamentally different from and antipathetic to traditional Western civilization.

This argument, which already appears in his writings in the 1930s and 1940s, is most fully developed in his first major sociological study and best-known work, *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*. Written in 1947–50 and first published in France in 1954, this book only gained serious scholarly attention on its translation into English in 1964 as *The Technological Society*.¹⁵ As the title demonstrates, Ellul's English readership easily concludes that 'technology' is his primary concern but Ellul always protested against this translation of *la technique*. He preferred to speak of Technique because 'technology' is, strictly speaking, discourse about technique and, more importantly, 'technology' has come to have a relatively limited reference to machines and the application of scientific discoveries. In contrast, *la technique* is a much wider phenomenon for Ellul:

The term *technique*, as I use it, does not mean machines, technology, or this or that procedure for attaining an end. In our technological society, *technique* is the *totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency* (for a given stage of development) in *every* field of human activity.¹⁶

¹⁵ *The Technological Society*, op. cit. *La Technique* was republished by Economica, Paris in 1990 as part of their *Classiques des Sciences Sociales* series. Ellul's other books focussing on Technique and technology are *The Technological System* (Continuum, New York, 1980) and *The Technological Bluff* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1990).

¹⁶ *The Technological Society*, op. cit., xxxiii. See also *The Technological System*, op. cit., pp. 21–121.

OBITUARY: JACQUES ELLUL (1912–1994)

This, Ellul's fullest definition of Technique, reveals the four elements shaping his understanding:

(i) Technique is a universal entity and not simply particular individual techniques taken independently of each other.¹⁷

(ii) Technique applies to means and methods in all areas of life and so can be seen in art, sport, politics, and law as well as science and technology.

(iii) Technique only truly appears when man becomes conscious of his means and applies reason to them.¹⁸

(iv) Technique is marked by the quest for absolute efficiency (*l'efficacité*).

Ellul argues that since the eighteenth century the relationship between Technique and wider society has fundamentally altered and that a complex combination of demographic, economic and social changes has led to Technique gaining new characteristics in its relation with society.¹⁹ Technique is no longer limited as it was in the past (e.g. to certain spheres of life, geographically, in its development) and the great variety of similar techniques operating within and across cultures has also disappeared as the most efficient is universally adopted. As a result, man can no longer freely choose between different means and methods of action and techniques are no longer subject to criticism on the basis of society's values.

Ellul contends that Technique in contemporary society is therefore qualitatively and not only quantitatively different from Technique in the past. Most fundamentally, Technique is now autonomous — free from control by man or any other sphere of society — and it wholly encompasses our civilization instead of being one component within it:

Technique has progressively mastered *all* the elements of civilization ... *Technical civilization* means that our civilization is constructed *by* technique (makes a part of civilization only what belongs to technique), *for* technique (in that everything in this civilization must serve a technical end), and *is* exclusively technique (in that it excludes whatever is not technique or reduces it to technical form).²⁰

¹⁷ In *The Technological System* Ellul argues that Technique can be analysed as a system within our society.

¹⁸ Ellul calls this 'the technical phenomenon' (*le phénomène technique*) and admitted parallels between his understanding of Technique and Weber's account of rationalisation in the modern world.

¹⁹ This argument is fully developed in the opening two chapters of *The Technological Society*, op. cit., pp. 3–147.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 127–8. The fullest discussion of this most contentious claim of Technique's autonomy is found in Winner, Langdon, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1977.

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Any work within Ellul's sociological corpus — particularly his incisive critique of the modern bureaucratic, totalitarian state and contemporary political discourse (*The Political Illusion*) and his illuminating study of the mass media (*Propaganda*) — can only be properly understood when read within this wider context as part of Ellul's sociological project of analysing and critiquing the radically new social phenomena with which we have to live in our technical civilization.²¹

Theological studies

Ellul's theological studies take three distinct forms. Some of his works examine particular biblical texts²² while others provide biblical and theological reflections on particular subjects.²³ The limited scope of this article renders discussion of these works impossible and the focus must instead be on the structure of his ethics as most fully developed in his specifically ethical writings: *Presence of the Kingdom*, *To Will and To Do*, and *Ethics of Freedom*.²⁴

Ellul's ethical writings present a thoroughly theological ethic for Christians and, as with his other theological studies, their primary goal is to enable Christians to hear and obey the Word of God in the modern world. He rarely interacts with secular moral philosophy because, like Bonhoeffer, he views the whole enterprise of ethics as a consequence of the fall:

The serpent said to Eve, 'You will be like God, knowing good and evil'. Such is the point of departure. Before this decision of man, Adam never raised the question of good and evil ... He found himself in communion with the will of God ...²⁵

²¹ *The Political Illusion*, Random House, New York, 1967; *Propaganda*, Knopf, New York, 1965.

²² These include *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972) on 2 Kings, *Apocalypse* (Seabury, New York, 1977) on Revelation, and *Reason for Being* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1990) on Ecclesiastes.

²³ Among these are *The Meaning of the City* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1970), *Prayer and Modern Man* (Seabury, New York, 1970), *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (Seabury, New York, 1973), and *Anarchy and Christianity* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991).

²⁴ *Presence of the Kingdom* (Helmets & Howard, Colorado Springs, 1989, 2nd edn), was first published in France in 1947 and remains the best introduction to Ellul's thought, particularly in this recent expanded edition with Dan Clendenin's Introduction; *To Will and To Do* (Pilgrim Press, Philadelphia, 1969); *Ethics of Freedom*, op. cit.

²⁵ *To Will and To Do*, op. cit., p. 5. This opening to Ellul's introduction to his ethics clearly echoes Bonhoeffer's similar radical opening to his ethics: 'The knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to invalidate this knowledge' (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, SCM Press, London, 1955, p. 3).

OBITUARY: JACQUES ELLUL (1912–1994)

Adopting a voluntarist and nominalist position, Ellul states, 'The good is not God. The good is the will of God. All that God wills is good ... simply because God wills it'.²⁶ In his original communion with God, man knew and lived this good but, as a result of the fall (which Ellul prefers to call '*la rupture*' in order to emphasise its essence is loss of communion with God), man has become incapable of knowing and doing the good apart from God's self-revelation. Therefore, despite their utility and necessity for social life, all human moralities (including 'Christian' ethics) stand condemned as rebellious man's attempt to define and determine the good which God alone can decide and make known.²⁷

Despite this strict 'impossibility' of a Christian ethic, Ellul, in typically dialectical fashion, is equally insistent that an ethic is also 'necessary' for Christians in order to prepare them to hear God's word and to call them to incarnate their faith in the concrete problems of life in the fallen world.

The 'necessary but impossible' ethic which Ellul develops is structured in terms of the form and character of the Christian presence in the world.²⁸ Its shape is therefore determined by Ellul's theological beliefs about God and the world.

The social and political world in which we live must be realistically viewed as the Johannine *kosmos*. It is the product of man's rejection of communion with God and Ellul sees it as therefore characterised by eros (evident in covetousness and the will to power), a desire to exclude the living God, and human subjection to necessity. Despite these features, the world is still loved by God. He seeks to re-establish communion with man by speaking his word into the world, has redeemed the world through the incarnation of his Word in Jesus Christ, and will thus re-create it in communion with him after his final judgment.

In this situation the Christian's unique calling is to be 'in the world but not of it' because, although still a sinner and part of the fallen world, he is, in Christ, restored to communion with God. He is therefore called to live at the juncture of the world and God's word, to hear God's word, and to incarnate its revolutionary power by means of a distinctive lifestyle and way of being in the world.

The Christian's life will be revolutionary because, shaped by God's word, its character will be in complete tension with the character of the

²⁶ *To Will and To Do*, op. cit., p. 6.

²⁷ For Ellul on human moralities and the impossibility of a Christian ethic see both *To Will and To Do* and his *Subversion of Christianity* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986), pp. 69–94.

²⁸ The most obvious evidence of this structure is the original French title of *Presence of the Kingdom* — *Présence au monde moderne* — and that of Ellul's 1963 volume, *Fausse présence au monde moderne*, translated as *False Presence of the Kingdom* (Seabury, New York, 1972).

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

world apart from God. It will be characterised by self-giving agape love evident in non-power rather than by the eros of the world.²⁹ It will bring into the rebellious world the holy presence of the Wholly Other God which the world seeks to exclude. It will also be — and this was Ellul's strongest emphasis and one of his most significant contributions to Christian ethics — a life of freedom in the face of the different forms of worldly necessity.³⁰

The concrete implications of this general theological ethic are derived in two ways. Sometimes they arise from a claim that certain features of the fallen world are constant. There is then a Christian stance which can be universalised to all times and places. Thus, in the world which is characterised by violence, the Christian must always reject all justifications of violence and seek to live non-violently and, in the face of the permanently acquisitive power of Mammon, the Christian should always revolt by giving money away.³¹ That universal form of concrete application is, however, not the norm:

Morality should express our way of being present to the world. Hence it should vary as the world changes ... There can be no morality except a contemporary one.³²

Ellul's ethical counsel therefore most often arises from setting his general understanding of the pattern of the Christian life in the context of his sociological analysis of the modern world. It is by this means that he is able to reach his specific and often controversial conclusions about the best contemporary forms of incarnating Christian faith in a lifestyle of freedom, holiness and love. Thus, although he has argued that Scripture reveals God's regular challenge to established political power as a form of the world's eros and so Christians must always be distinct from the state and engaged in critical dialogue with it, his advocacy of anarchy as a preferred Christian political stance arises primarily from correlating his vision of the revolutionary Christian calling with his sociological account of the determinative

²⁹ Ellul here rather uncritically follows the sharp distinction between agape and eros classically developed in Nygren, Anders, *Agape and Eros*, SPCK, London, 1932–9.

³⁰ Although only his *Ethics of Freedom* has been published this was conceived as the first of a trilogy which also includes an *Ethics of Holiness* (completed but unpublished at Ellul's death) and an *Ethics of Relation*. For discussion of the freedom and necessity motif in Ellul's work see Clendenin, Daniel, *Theological Method in Jacques Ellul*, University Press of America, Boston Way, 1987. In 'The Original "Liberation Theologian"?', *Cross Currents*, Vol. XXXV, No. 1, Spring 1985, pp. 17–32, Tom Hanks argues that this emphasis in Ellul's work makes him the precursor by almost two decades of liberation theologies.

³¹ These arguments are central to *Violence*, op. cit. and *Money and Power* (Marshall Pickering, Basingstoke, 1986).

³² *To Will and To Do*, op. cit., p. 250.

and destructive power of the modern totalitarian state in our technical civilization.³³

The Ellul Oeuvre

The central question raised by Ellul's corpus is that of the inter-relationship between the two strands of his writing. Here Ellul is attacked from both disciplines.

Some traditional conservative theologians have argued that Ellul's theology is driven and fundamentally distorted by his sociology and his Marxist sympathies.³⁴ As the discussion of his ethics has shown, this allegation contains an element of truth: as a self-avowedly contextual ethic, many of Ellul's concrete ethical conclusions are shaped by his sociological analysis of the modern world. His general ethic and characterisation of the Christian life cannot, however, be criticised on these grounds. Although it clearly has parallels within secular revolutionary projects, his ethic is carefully formulated as a *theological* ethic and it fundamentally represents a contemporary re-statement of the radical dissenting Christian tradition (typified in Protestantism by the Anabaptists) which can, as Ellul himself has shown, make a strong case for a thoroughly biblical basis to its stance.

The more common accusation Ellul faces is the opposite charge that, in the words of one critic of his writing on technology, his sociological studies are merely 'the barely camouflaged judgment of a Huguenot prophet'.³⁵ Once again, there is an element of truth in this claim because Ellul's theology requires him to view our world as a fallen world broken from God.³⁶ This general belief about the world is, however, wholly unable to yield the concrete sociological analyses Ellul offers. Nothing in Ellul's theology, for example, necessitates the numerous and often positive conclusions he draws about historical societies and their evolution in his *Histoire des Institutions*. Similarly,

³³ This method is clear in *Ethics of Freedom*, op. cit., pp. 385–98 and *Jesus and Marx: From Gospel to Ideology* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1989), pp. 153–77 but unfortunately less so in *Anarchy and Christianity*, op. cit., perhaps because the original French edition of that work was written primarily for an anarchist and not a Christian audience.

³⁴ This is seen in Berthoud, Jean-Marc, 'Jacques Ellul et l'impossible dialectique entre Marx et Calvin', *La Revue Réformée*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1982, pp. 176–91 and especially in Bauman, Michael, *Pilgrim Theology*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1992, pp. 157–82.

³⁵ Margolis, Joseph, 'Three Conceptions of Technology: Satanic, Titanic, Human', *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 7, 1984, p. 146.

³⁶ 'The world is the product of the fall ... social reality is included in that universe which has willed itself separated from God. It is always necessary to interpret it in relation to that separation' (ET of Ellul, Jacques, 'Réalité Sociale et théologie du droit', in *Existenz und Ordnung: Festschrift für Erik Wolf*, ed. Würtenberger, Thomas, V. Klostermann, Frankfurt, 1962, p. 47).

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

his theology cannot be claimed as the source of *either* his conclusion concerning the absolute novelty of modern society and its dangers or his choice of Technique as its determining factor and his detailed analysis of Technique and other phenomena.

As the biographical account made clear, the original source of Ellul's sociological studies is to be found in the critique of the modern world developed by the personalist movement in the 1930s and his analysis is based on personal reflection upon his complex and changing world under the influence of thinkers such as Marx, Durkheim and Weber. The fact that, despite their rejection by mainstream secular sociology, his non-Christian friend Charbonneau reaches similar conclusions in his work confirms Ellul's claim that such a *prise de conscience* is not confined to Christians or dependent upon adopting a particular theological world-view.³⁷

In perhaps his last major public speech, responding to a November 1993 symposium in his honour, Ellul spoke of the two domains of his books and clarified his conception of their relationship which, with minor qualifications, has been defended here:

What is their relation? First a scrupulous distinction ... These were two domains, two methods, two distinct interests.³⁸

Despite the validity of this claim, Ellul's theology with its strong emphasis on the Fall as a rupture of the world's communion with God, must be seen as fundamental to his thought and project of work. It is the theologically based contrast between God and the fallen world which undergirds the distinctive dialectical structure of Ellul's *oeuvre*.³⁹ Revelation, he holds, must be the source of any human knowledge of God and of the general calling of the Christian. It also makes known to us the universal characteristics of man and his world apart from God and gives the hope necessary to face that stark reality. It cannot however, provide either a sociological method or comprehension of any society's structures. These must instead be the product of natural knowledge and so his sociological studies have their own methodology and internal intellectual consistency.

³⁷ *Ethics of Freedom*, op. cit., p. 231. Although sadly untranslated, some of Bernard Charbonneau's major works — *L'Etat, Le Système et le Chaos, Nuit et Jour: Science et Culture* — were reprinted in the *Classiques des Sciences Sociales* series, published by *Economica* from 1987 onwards.

³⁸ Quoted in *The Ellul Forum for the Critique of Technological Civilization*, No. 13, July 1994, p. 18. Available from The Ellul Forum, Dept. of Religious Studies, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620.

³⁹ 'Between my two sets of books there was a caesura, which is more an opposition that translates the dialectical confrontation between the Natural and the Revealed' (ET of Ellul, Jacques, 'Réponse à M. Merle au sujet de "L'illusion politique"', *Revue Française de Science Politique*, vol. 16, 1966, pp. 96–7).

C. Concluding Assessment

Ellul's writing is distinctive not only for its great scope but also its style. To the uninitiated reader his books appear unsystematic and, because of his dialectical method, full of contradictions. They are full of broadbrush accounts and sweeping statements, and often highly polemical in order to shock and challenge his readers. Unfortunately, all these features of his work tend to limit the influence of his thought to readers who are already reasonably sympathetic to his ideas or who are willing to persevere despite their antipathy and confusion. John Wilkinson, whose translation of *The Technological Society* did much to introduce Ellul to the English speaking world, admitted in his introduction to *The Meaning of the City*, that 'the major problem in writing an introduction to any work of Ellul is ... to persuade sensible people not to throw it down before they have negotiated even the first ten pages'.⁴⁰

Even those who do read quite widely in the corpus often find that the complex and dialectical nature of Ellul's thought leaves them unable to see the whole picture and grasp Ellul's central concerns.

By placing Ellul's writing in the context of his life and sketching the basic structure of his corpus and the central elements in his thinking, the account offered here has attempted to short-circuit such difficulties and introduce both the man and his work.

His sociological studies represent an original contribution to critical social analysis. He stands as a radical critic of modernity who, over a period of half a century, developed the insights and revolutionary vision which were born in the context of the French personalist movement, during the turbulent decade of the 1930s. At their heart lies his discernment that *la technique* is determinative in the contemporary world. Although elements of his account of this phenomenon are highly contentious, his perceptiveness and the calibre of his work are proved by the fact that, forty years after its completion, *The Technological Society*, remains an indispensable work for those who wish to understand our technological civilization.

Theologically, Ellul was less innovative, writing out of the world of Kierkegaardian existentialism and Reformed neo-orthodoxy. He nevertheless made a significant contribution to this world and to the wider Christian community through both his original, prophetic interpretations of Scripture and his development of a contemporary Christian ethic. This theological ethic, while being faithful to God's written word and the theological tradition from which Ellul came, also enabled his readers to hear God's living word addressed to them in the concrete reality of their modern world and showed them how their lives, like his, could incarnate the Christian calling not to be conformed to this present age.

⁴⁰ *The Meaning of the City*, op. cit., xii.